

I Disappearing years

I. The facts

במדבר פרק כ

(א) ויבאו בני־ישראל כל־העדה מדבר־צן בחדש הראשון וישב העם בקדש ותמת שם מרים ותקבר שם

(ב) ולא־היה מים לעדה ויקהלו על־משה ועל־אהרן

(1) The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there.

(2) The community was without water, and they joined against Moshe and Aharon.

II. Examples of number 40 (second only to number 7) in Jewish tradition

- 40 days of rain to create the Flood
- 40 days between appearance of mountain tops and Noach's opening of the Ark's window
- 40 years-Yitzchak and Esav each marry
- 40 days for the embalming of Yaakov
- 40 days Moshe repeatedly on Har Sinai,
- 40 days-Meraglim;
- 40 years Wilderness Wandering
- Forty measures-weight of each stone carried into the Jordan
- 40 days for Nineveh to repent
- 40 days Eliyahu wanders without food
- 40 years Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai each begin rabbinic careers
- 40 Av Melachot-Shabbat
- And more....

III. Possible significance of the number 40

תלמוד בבלי: יבמות סט:

אמר רב חסדא טובלת ואוכלת עד ארבעים דאי לא מיעברא הא לא מיעברא ואי מיעברא עד ארבעים מיא בעלמא היא

- 40 days...a pivotal stage in utero
- Number 40 -a birthing process
- Disappearance of 40 years?
- What determines value of time's passage?
- When time doesn't heal....

IV: Allowed Idolatry??

A. The Facts

במדבר כא:ד-ט

ויסעו מהר ההר דרך ים־סוף לסבב את־ארץ אדום ותקצר נפש־העם בדרך
 וידבר העם באלהים ובמשה למה העליתנו ממצרים למות במדבר כי אין לחם ואין מים ונפשנו
 קצה בלחם הקלקל
 וישלח יקוק בעם את הנחשים השרפים וינשכו את־העם וימת עם־רב מישראל
 ויבא העם אל־משה ויאמרו חטאנו כי־דברנו ביקוק ובך התפלל אל־יקוק ויסר מעלינו את־הנחש
 ויתפלל משה בעד העם
 ויאמר יקוק אל־משה עשה לך שרף ושים אתו על־נס והיה כל־הנשוך וראה אתו וחי
ויעש משה נחש נחשת וישמהו על־הנס והיה אם־נשך הנחש את־איש והביט אל־נחש הנחשת
 וחי

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against Hashem and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food."

GOD sent *seraph* serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died.

The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned by speaking against Hashem and against you. Intercede with Hashem to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people.

Then Hashem said to Moses, “Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard. And anyone who was bitten who then looks at it shall recover.”

Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and if someone was bitten by a serpent, they would look at the copper serpent and recover.

B. The Search for Answers

משנה ראש השנה ג:ח

עשה לך שרף ושים אתו על נס, והיה כל הנשוק וראה אתו וחי. וכי נחש ממית, או נחש מחיה. אלא, בזמן שישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהן שבשמים, היו מתרפאים, ואם לאו, היו נמוקים.

“Make for yourself a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that is bitten, when he sees it, he shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Did the serpent kill, or did the serpent preserve life? Rather, when the Jewish people turned their eyes upward and subjected their hearts to their Father in Heaven, they were healed, but if not, they rotted from their snakebites.

אבן עזרא במדבר בא:ח

על נס שיהיה גבוה ויראו אותו הכל ורבים השתבשו ואמרו כי זאת הצורה לקבל כח עליונים וחליל' חלילה כי הדבר נעשה בצווי השם ואין לנו לחפש למה צורת נחש ואם לא בן יראנו היש עץ שימתיק המים המרים אפי' הדבש לא ימתיקם ומה טעם לשום דבלת תאנים על השחין ואין בתולדת הדבלה להסיר השחין והאמת כי נשגבה ממנו דעת עליון:

AND SET IT UPON A POLE. So that it be on a high place and everyone will be able to see it. Many err. They say that this was an image that had the capability of receiving powers from on high. Far be it, far be it [for one to believe such a thing], for this thing was made by Hashem's command. We should not investigate why Moses was commanded to make the form of a snake. Should someone disagree, let him show us if there is a tree that makes bitter waters sweet. Even honey will not sweeten them. What reason was there to put a cake of figs upon a boil? It is not in the nature of figs to remove boils. The truth is that the mind of the Almighty is beyond us.

חזקוני כא:ט

והביט אל נחש הנחשת על ידי שהיה נתון כתורן על הנס הנשוך תולה עיניו למעלה ומכוין לבו
לאביו שבשמים
ודוקא נחש ולא בריה אחרת להודיע נפלאותיו של הקב"ה שכך מדותיו שהוא מכה באיזמל
ומרפא באיזמל.

והביט אל נחש הנחשת, "and when he looked at this replica of a copper coloured snake (he would live);" looking at this phenomenon automatically would make such a person think of heaven, and that his only hope for surviving the snakebite would come from heaven.

The reason that G-d chose this particular phenomenon was to remind the victim that the cure for his ailment had to be found in reversing the source of his affliction. The miraculous powers of the Creator to heal, would best be demonstrated if it was shown that He could use the source of the affliction as the medicine that would cure it. [I have departed from the author's use of the "chisel," which to this Editor is rather meaningless, although it was taken from the commentary of B'chor shor. Ed.]

רמבן במדבר כא:ט

כי הוא מדרכי התורה שכל מעשיה נס בתוך נס, תסיר הנזק במזיק ותרפא החולי במחליא.....
והפיל כי צוה השם שיתרפאו במזיק הממית בטבע, ועשו דמותו ושמו, וכשיהיה האדם מביט
בכונה אל נחש הנחשת שהוא כעין המזיק לגמרי היה חי, להודיעם כי השם ממית ומחיה:
It appears to me that the secret of this matter is that this is one of the ways of the Torah, every deed of which is a miracle within a miracle. Thus [the Torah] removes injury by means of the cause of the injury, and heals illness by means of the cause of the sickness...

Now it is a well-known medical principle that all people bitten by poisonous creatures become dangerously ill when they see them, or [even] when they [only] see their likeness...This was to make them realize that it is G-d [alone] *Who sendeth death and maketh alive*. [for the people who had been bitten, and yet G-d wanted to heal them through it].

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch

"*Va'yishalach Hashem Ba'am et hanechashim haserafim...* and Hashem let the fiery serpents loose against the people..."

There is a significant difference between the words "*Va'yishlach*" (conjugated in the Hebrew *kal* form) and "*Va'yishalach*" (conjugated in the Hebrew *pi'el* form). The former term indicates an act of "sending" while the latter term implies an act of "setting free" or "letting loose." By introducing the attack of the serpents with the term "*Va'yishalach*" as opposed to "*Va'yishlach*", the Torah conveys that Hashem does not "send" a supernatural plague of serpents to attack the Israelites... Hashem simply lifts his divine protection from the people and, by doing so; "lets loose" the dangers that are already there.

The copper serpent can therefore be seen, Hirsch boldly suggests, not as a symbol of Hashem's miraculous intervention, but as a reminder of what can occur *when Hashem fails to intervene...*

Debating the Extent of Divine Providence

דברים יא: יג-טז

והיה אם־שמע תשמעו אל־מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את־יקוק אלהיכם ולעבדו
 בכל־לבבכם ובכל־נפשכם
 ונתתי מטר־ארצכם בעתו יורה ומלקוש ואספת דגנך ותירשך ויצהרך
 ונתתי עשב בשדך לבהמתך ואכלת ושבעת
 השמרו לכם פן יפתה לבבכם וסרתם ועבדתם אלהים אחרים והשתחוויתם להם
 וחרה אף־יקוק בכם ועצר את־השמים ולא־יהיה מטר והאדמה לא תתן את־יבולה ואבדתם מהרה
 מעל הארץ הטבה אשר יקוק נתן לכם

תהילים לג:יד

ממכון־שבתו השגיח אל כל־ישבי הארץ

From His dwelling-place He watches intently all the inhabitants of the earth—

תלמוד בבלי חולין

ואמר רבי חנינא: אין אדם נוקף אצבעו מלמטה, אלא אם כן מכריזין עליו מלמעלה, שנאמר:
 "מה' מצעדי גבר כוננו ואדם מה יבין דרכו" ..

And Rabbi Ḥanina says: A person injures his finger below, on earth, only if they declare about him on high that he should be injured, as it is stated: It is of the

Lord that a man's goings are established; and a man, what does he understand of his way

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה ג:ב

שלישיות — יושב וזן את כל העולם כולו מקרני ראמים עד ביצי כנים,
 [The Holy One, Blessed be He,] sits and sustains the entire world, from the horns
 of wild oxen to the eggs of lice

תלמוד בבלי ברכות לג:

ואמר רבי חנינא: הכל בידי שמים, חוץ מיראת שמים.
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תלמוד בבלי מועד קטן כח.

אמר רבא: חיי, בני ומזוני, לא בזכותא תליא מילתא, אלא במזלא תליא מילתא.
 Rava said: life, children, and sustenance do not depend on merit, but rather they
 depend upon fate [mazel].

לקוטי תורה, שיר השירים ט"ז:ד'

וזהו ויקם עדות ביעקב ותורה שם בישראל פירוש ביעקב וישראל שבהם ועל ידם הקים עדות
 ותורה שם שמהם נמשכה התורה בפיו הכל תלוי במזל אפילו ס"ת בהיכל
 "And thus: 'He established a testimony in Jacob and set a Torah in Israel.'
 Meaning: *In Jacob and Israel themselves, and through them*, He established the
 testimony and placed the Torah — for from them the Torah was drawn forth. In
 the explanation: *Everything depends on mazal*, even a Sefer Torah in the ark."

תלמוד בבלי שבת קנו

איתמר, רבי חנינא אומר: מזל מחכים, מזל מעשיר, ויש מזל לישראל. רבי יוחנן אמר: אין מזל לישראל.

שמות יב:כב

ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח־ביתו עד־בקר
 None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning.

תלמוד בבלי בבא קמא ס.

כיון שניתן רשות למשחית, אינו מבחין בין צדיקים לרשעים.

Once permission is granted to the destroyer to kill, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked...

תנו רבנן: דבר בעיר – כנס רגליך, שנאמר: "ואתם לא תצאו איש מפתח ביתו עד בקר".

If there is plague in the city, gather your feet as it is stated: "And none of you shall go out of the opening of his house until the morning."

רמבן שמות יג:טז

וְעַתָּה אֲמַר לְךָ כָּלֵל בְּטַעַם מִצְוֹת רַבּוֹת הִנֵּה מַעֲת הַיּוֹת ע"ג בְּעוֹלָם מִיָּמֵי אֶנוֹשׁ הַחֲלוּ הַדְּעוֹת לְהַשְׁתַּבֵּשׁ בְּאַמוּנָה, מֵהֶם כּוֹפְרִים בְּעֶקֶר וְאוֹמְרִים כִּי הָעוֹלָם קַדְמוֹן, כִּחְשׁוּ בֵּה' וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֹא הוּא (ירמ' ה יב), וּמֵהֶם מְכַחֲשִׁים בִּידְיָעָתוֹ הַפְּרֻטִית וְאָמְרוּ אֵיכָה יָדַע אֵל וַיֵּשׁ דְּעָה בְּעֵלְיוֹן (תהלים עג יא), וּמֵהֶם נְשִׂידוּ בִּידְיָעָה וּמְכַחֲשִׁים בְּהַשְׁגָּחָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ אָדָם כַּדְּגֵי הַיָּם שְׁלֹא יִשְׁגִּיחַ הָאֵל בָּהֶם וְאִין עִמָּהֶם עֹנֵשׁ אוֹ שָׂכָר, יֹאמְרוּ עֲזַב ה' אֶת הָאָרֶץ.

And now I shall declare to you a general principle in the reason of many commandments. Beginning with the days of Enosh when idol-worship came into existence, opinions in the matter of faith fell into error. Some people denied the root of faith by saying that the world is eternal; *they denied the Eternal, and said: It is not He* [Who called forth the world into existence]. Others denied His knowledge of individual matters, *and they say, How doth G-d know? and is there knowledge in the Most High?* Some admit His knowledge but deny the principle of providence *and make men as the fishes of the sea*, [believing] that G-d does not watch over them and that there is no punishment or reward for their deeds, for they say *the Eternal hath forsaken the land*

Rambam Moreh Nevuchim

"Divine providence is connected with divine intellectual influence, and the same beings which are benefited by the latter so as to become intellectual, and to comprehend things comprehensible to rational beings, are also under the control of divine providence, which examines all their deeds with a view of rewarding or punishing them."¹

¹ Rambam Moreh Nevuchim 3:17

According to the Rambam, *Hashgacha P'ratit*, Hashem's direct individual care, extends only to human beings, who as creatures of intellect, can themselves relate directly to Hashem. Divine care for species other than man, on the other hand, remains in the realm of *Hashgacha K'lalit*, general (rather than specific) providence and is limited to the preservation of the species as a whole. Hashem does not directly determine by specific decree whether "a certain leaf drops from a tree" or a "certain spider catches a certain fly." These events are the result of chance; in a world that continues to follow natural rules set in place by Hashem at Creation.

Even when it comes to his relationship with man, however, Hashem's gift of providence is not universally applied. *Since divine influence reaches man through man's own intellectual strivings, the greater man's intellectual and spiritual perfection, "the greater the effect of divine Providence upon him."* Man thus plays a direct role in determining the impact of divine providence on his own life. Hashem's care over man will be commensurate with man's own religious search.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchuk

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To the Rav, providence is not only a divinely granted gift, but an explicit imperative. Afforded with the opportunity to establish an association with Hashem, man is obliged to do so. The Man-God relationship, however, is a two-way street. When an individual reaches out to Hashem, Hashem reaches out in return; bestowing upon that individual, in ever-increasing measure, the personal gift of divine providence.

However...

The Rav, however, recognizes that this model of personal providence can fall short in the face of the episodes of overwhelming tragedy that periodically engulf mankind. While the phenomenon of individual, personal suffering is difficult enough to comprehend in a world governed by divine providence; even more difficult are those national moments such as the holocaust when Hashem's presence seems to disappear entirely.

Such moments can best be approached, the Rav maintains, by turning to the difficult biblical concept of *hester panim*, the hiding of Hashem's face. The Torah prophesies, that at particular moments in history, Hashem, in response to sin, will take the radical step of "hiding his face from the world."³

The phenomenon of *hester panim*, the Rav maintains, connects to the Torah's narrative of Creation. Creation emerges as a process by which Hashem, step-by-step, imposes order upon *tohu va'vohu*, primordial chaos. Such chaos, however,

³ Devarim 31:18

the Rav explains, never disappears, but continues to course beneath the surface of existence; held at bay only by Hashem's constant renewal of creational order. When Hashem "hides His face," He withdraws from direct maintenance of that order and, as He backs away, the world reverts to its original state of *tohu va'vohu*. During such tragic times, such as the Holocaust, divine providence seems to disappear and the violent forces of nature and chance hold sway, engulfing righteous and non- righteous